

**Letters Home of Dr. Walter Burwell,
World War II physician aboard USS *Suwannee* (CVE-27)**

U.S.S. Suwannee
F.P.O. San Francisco
March 19, 1944

Dear Mother,

It is extremely hot, but that must be expected for we are approaching the equator. For several days now, there has been a vein of anticipation coursing through the officers and men, because, although the majority of us have "crossed the line" many times, there is nonetheless a worthwhile contingent of lowly, slimy pollywogs aboard who have never been initiated duly into the Mysteries of the Ancient Order of the Deep.

Already various signs have mysteriously appeared at prominent places throughout the ship, warning the loathsome pollywogs of their impending adversities, and advising that they leap overboard and swim for land rather than to be found trespassing in the Royal Domain of Neptunus Rex when this vessel enters therein. In like manner, other signs have been seen welcoming all Shellbacks returning to the boundaries of the Raging Main and inviting them cordially to attend His Majesty's Royal Court when it convenes aboard this ship. All such messages are signed by Davey Jones, Royal Scribe to his Majesty, Neptunus Rex.

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March 20, 1944

This morning, a smaller ship pulled alongside us to transfer two injured men to us, as they have not the facilities for their proper diagnosis and their care for the length of time which must pass before they can be within reach of a hospital. As the two ships cruise along in a parallel course, lines are rigged between them on which the injured men will be suspended in stretchers and drawn across. While standing on the cat-walk watching the preparations and waiting to receive my new patients, I can see that the festivities in connection with "crossing the line" have already begun on the other ship, for among the crew are many grotesquely painted faces, strange costumes, and weird hair cuts, indicating that the pollywogs have already been marked for their coming ordeal.

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We are now within the Boundaries of the Raging Main! About noon the word was passed that a message had been received from Neptune's royal Admiral informing us of our entrance into his domain and ordering all pollywogs to take up lookout stations to watch for the approach of the Royal Scribe, Davey Jones, who is expected to be received aboard about dusk as His Majesty's Emissary for the purpose of inspecting this vessel and apprehending all lowly, slimy, pollywogs who have dared intrude in this kingdom. In addition, the Royal Admiral has deputized certain trusty Shellbacks as Royal Cops, who are to see that order is maintained, and that proper respect and humility is demonstrated by all loathsome pollywogs.

These Royal Cops are costumed in the most outlandish clothing they can procure, and

there is considerable variation in their appearances, but they all have two things in common, i.e., each wears a large card-board star on his chest with the words "Royal Cop" inscribed thereon, and each carries a sock packed tightly with waste-wadding, which is used as a club to belabor recalcitrant and disrespectful pollywogs.

Even now, on the flight deck, the royal Cops have all the pollywogs performing various duties. The crow's nest and all the look-out stations are well manned by pollywogs in absurd costumes, scanning the horizon through rolls of paper representing telescopes and singing out at regular intervals, "Please excuse this slimy pollywog, but Davey Jones has not yet been sighted!"

Meanwhile, at the bow is a group casting sounding lines out to insure that we do not pass too closely over any of His Majesty's Royal Palaces and knock down a turret, and the Royal Cops are admonishing those engaged to take care not to drop the lead on any of the beautiful mermaids. At the same time, the disbursing officer, who is making his first trip across, is passing among the crew with his money bags filled with wooden chips, which he distributes as he shouts, "Pay Day! Pay Day!"

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At chow tonight, the pollywog officers, tastefully attired with their shirts and trousers inside out and backwards, without shoes, served all trusty shellback officers. You might guess that there were a few unfortunate accidents (such as the spilling of soup into the lap of the shellback sitting next to me) which, I suspect, were not entirely due in all cases to lack of experience in serving table.

Just as chow was finished, the word was passed, "Davey Jones has been sighted and is alongside! "All hands report to the hangar deck space to receive him!"

And so, the long-awaited Davey finally appeared climbing up the starboard ladder to the hangar deck, completely costumed even to the traditional patch over one eye. After being welcomed by no less than the Captain himself, the Royal Clerk (Davey Jones) then called on all pollywogs to rise and present themselves before him. Quite a few were rash enough to attempt an escape, but were quickly overpowered by the Royal Cops and promptly thrown in the brig, and in due course, with much pomp and circumstance, Davy read out the following royal Proclamation:

"In and for the Royal court of the Realm of Neptune, District of Equitorious, and Inhabitants of the Realm of the Deep.

"To and against all Un-initiated Pollywogs of the Crew of the USS Suwanee:

"You are hereby commanded to appear before the Royal court of the Realm of Neptune, in the District of Equitorious, because it has been brought to the attention of his August Highness, Neptunus Rex, through his trusty shellbacks, that the good ship Suwannee is entering these waters and is manned by a crew some of whom have not acknowledged the sovereignty of the Ruler of the Deep, yet have transgressed on His domains, thereby incurring His Royal Displeasure.

"Therefore, be it known to all ye scum, vermin, box car tourists, hitch-hikers, hay makers, plow deserters, sea lawyers, beach combers, land lubbers, and politicians, that His Most royal Highness, Neptunus Rex, Supreme ruler of all Mermaids, Sharks, Squibs, Crabs Eels, and other Denizens of the Deep, will, with his Secretary and Royal Court, meet in full session on board the U.S.S. Suwannee, at 1630 on the 21st day of March, 1944, A.D., to hear your defense on these charges.

"It is therefore ordered and decreed that all Pollywogs present themselves before the

above named court at the time and place mentioned or be condemned to become shark food. Disobey this order under My Displeasure, which will lead to incarceration in Davey Jones' Locker.

"By order of His Royal Highness, Neptunus Rex, ruler of the Deep.

"Given under my hand and seal this 20th day of March 1944, A.D.

"David Jones, Royal Clerk."

By the time the pollywogs imprisoned in the brig were complaining so loudly and bitterly that the clamor could be heard all over the ship; they professed that it was too crowded and too hot. The royal Cops then happily and promptly overcame this latter discomfort by turning a fire hose into the brig.

Things have now quieted down, but the pollywogs are exchanging apprehensive glances, for they realize that we are now, comparatively speaking, relatively out of danger of direct enemy action and that there will be little to divert the attention of the shellbacks from their complete and proper initiation tomorrow.

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March 21, 1944

All morning there have been three lowly pollywogs stationed on the forecandle deck. Two are equipped with grappling hooks on long lines, and their purpose, and duty, is to grapple and draw the imaginary equatorial line up to the deck at the bow of the ship when we come to it. The third pollywog is provided with a huge pair of shears for cutting the line when it is drawn up to the deck, thus allowing us to cross the equator without running afoul of the equatorial line.

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At three-thirty this afternoon, Neptune and his royal court appeared climbing up the starboard ladder to the flight deck to be welcomed by the Captain. This formality carried out, His Majesty then sat in state beside His Royal Queen, and attended by The royal Clerk, the royal Admiral, The Royal Barbers, the Court Physician, and the court Jester, while the royal Baby and Royal Nursemaids sat at the foot of the throne, and flanked by a dozen trusty spear and trident bearers. Having then formally declared that the Royal Court was now convened, His Majesty commanded all Pollywogs be brought before him.

The Royal Cops had, in the meantime, by the use of their much worn clubs, herded the initiates together and brought them up on the forward elevator, with the exception of one or two unfortunate recalcitrants who were already in the stocks. One by one, the miserable pollywogs were then singled out and dragged before the Court, where they were ministered to first by the Court Physician, who spayed their throats with quinine, next by the Royal Barber who either shaved off all their hair or made very intricate designs by shaving off portions, and last by the Court Jester, who painted them in blue and red designs, depending on his own originality. Having been thus prepared, the victim was then ready to pay his respects to none other than Neptune himself. And so, kneeling before His August Highness, the unhappy pollywog was "allowed" to kiss the ruler's hand, which contained a fistful of unwholesome looking, sticky, and foul-appearing paste which was abruptly smeared in the subject's face or on his head while thus engaged. The victims were then sentenced to "walk the plank", a procedure in which they were

thrown into a canvas tank filled with water and attractively dyed a fetching bilious green. following this, they were fished out, and allowed to run through a double line of trusty shellbacks wielding waste-wadding stuffed clubs. Having thus satisfactorily withstood the ordeal, the pollywogs were then considered as having been duly and properly converted to trusty shellbacks of His Majesty's Realm.

Today has been an auspicious day indeed, for not only have we "crossed the line" on March 21, when the sun is exactly at its zenith over the equator, but we have crossed the 180th meridian as well. This peculiar circumstance entitles us to the honor of belonging to the Order of Golden Dragons, a destination as highly prized by seafaring men as any known.

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March 22, 1944

Things are relatively quiet today. Not much of interest to write about. The pollywogs of yesterday still show the results of their initiation, of course, since it'll be several days before the paint and dye wears off their skins, and several weeks before their hair grows out.

I had started this letter out with the intention of writing a little from day to day, but it is already so lengthy, that my original plan is obviously impractical. However I'll write another note in a few days.

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March 25, 1944

For the past two weeks, I have been reading Loyd Douglas' "The Robe", finishing it yesterday. It's a very popular novel, I understand, and I imagine you have read it. At any rate, I found it very interesting and entertaining. The story even went so far as to prompt my curiosity to the extent that I re-read several Books of the New Testament--something I have not done for several years.

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March 28, 1944

A very strange thing happened today; I'm sure you'll be surprised when I tell you. A smaller ship was alongside this morning, taking on fuel from us as we were cruising ahead, but I had not paid much attention, because I was busy at the time, and it is not an infrequent occurrence. Just as I was finishing up Sick Call, however, a messenger came up saying that there was someone on the other ship who wanted to see me. When I went down to the port quarterdeck and looked across--there stood Bull Clements! Isn't that something? We shouted back and forth for fifteen minutes or a half-an-hour before they pulled away, although we had a hard time understanding each other due to the noise all about us. But anyway, it was good to see him--you can imagine how surprised I was to see him under such circumstances, as I hadn't known that he was anywhere near us.

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April 2, 1944

I have been reading some more in my spare time and have just finished "The Story of Surgery" by Harvey Graham. Since it is a history of the origin of surgery and its development to the present day, written in an easily readable style, I enjoyed it a great deal.

You might also be interested to know that I've now finished my last assignment in the Correspondence Course I am taking, and I'm only waiting for an opportunity to mail it in. I'm very glad to be through with it, because it was quite lengthy and entailed a great deal of writing.

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April 4, 1944

Since my last note, I have started reading a book on Naval Hygiene, which is rather dry and technical, but it may be of some value to me.

There is a rumor going about that we may come into a port tomorrow or the next day, and if this be so, I'll be able to get this letter mailed. At any rate, it is getting so lengthy that I'd better close, but I'll write again by means of shorter notes at the next opportunity or when I have something of interest to write about.

I've put so much time in on this letter that I Haven't written any others this cruise; so be sure to say "hello" to everyone for me.

I miss you and think of you often, Mother. My regards to Spot.

Your devoted son,
Walter Brodie